

2. Puritan Days

To take a strictly chronological account of how far back the roots of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ actually go, one has to go all the way to the late 17th century. It was in the swampy, flat, black-soiled “Low Country” of the colonies that became South Carolina and Georgia where Puritans fleeing the brutal Winters and overpopulation of Massachusetts and its contiguous neighbors brought Congregational churches to a hot climate. For some 200 years, parsons and high-minded laity carried on a style of life at first identical to that in the frigid northeastern third of the America of that time. Those followers of the doctrines of John Calvin and radical British Reformers were staunchly industrious, they believed education was a moral duty for the masses rather than a luxury for the privileged few, and they demonstrated deep concern for the impact of religion upon the civic health of a community. Erskine Clarke of Columbia Theological Seminary remarks in his *Our Southern Zion* that both church and society shaped each other in complex ways:

... On the one hand, the ‘Scholastic’ tendency of the Reformed (or Calvinist) community—with its fear of chaos, its hierarchical assumptions, and its quest for order, harmony, and balance—would provide powerful ideological support to that side of low country society that ... sought the integration and preservation of the community through time by justifying the present system of authority. On the other hand, what has been broadly identified as ‘the humanist impulse’ within the Reformed tradition—with its fear of enclosing boundaries—would resonate with the region’s restlessness and its steady move toward the modern world.¹

And in worship, iconoclasm and a literalistic fear of violating of the Second Commandment (Philonic division) as enunciated in Exodus 20:4-6 drove the Puritans toward austerity, augmented, no doubt, by the circumstances of limited material development during settlement days. But it suited the Calvinist aversion to idolatry perfectly, as Clarke elaborates:

... The eye looks out to its object, but hearing receives into the human heart God’s word. Hearing, not seeing, was consequently the foundation of Reformed spirituality—for God speaks, and faith, it was said, consists of listening to the word of God ... there was a conviction that when God is presented in an identifiable form, an image, the purpose is to control God, to domesticate and reduce God to the tool of those in power. Fixed religious images lead to consolidations of power and to social docility ...

There was also, joyfully to the hearts of those in the present-day UCC, an ecumenical sensibility to the Puritan churches in the Low Country. According to Richard Taylor in his pioneering 1994 book on the subject of Congregationalism in the South, *Southern Congregational Churches*, the Charleston church, which is today known as Circular Congregational, had in its membership not only Yankee Puritans, but also other Calvinist groups such as French Huguenots, the Reformed of Germany and Switzerland, and the beginnings of Scots Presbyterianism in South Carolina.³ Eventually most of those groups would leave to form separate churches, but it gave the Charleston church a reputation as an incubator for Christian diversity, something it is still known for in its fourth century of existence.⁴ It was, furthermore, a voice for free expression in the midst of an Anglican establishment that had an unsavory association with royalist suppression of liberty.

The two other Low Country Congregational churches that had the greatest cultural impact were Dorchester in South Carolina and Midway in Georgia.⁵ The latter was in fact a child of the former, and claimed to have nurtured early leaders of Georgia and other states and other political figures, as well as early military, medical, legal, and clerical leaders of the South. Whatever one makes of those assertions today as to the intellectual and moral caliber of the membership of the Midway Church, its survival up the eve of the Civil War put it in far better stead than its numerous plantation-based sister churches. For, as it turned out, most of those were absorbed by aggressive Presbyterian proselytizing due in part to the increasing population advantage it had from Scots—Highland, English-border, or Ulster (erroneously, but popularly, termed “Scotch-Irish”)—immigration into the Carolina and Georgia upcountry. The other side of things, of course, was the increasing identification of Congregationalism in the public mind with opposition to slavery, especially from the 1830s onward. To be known as an “abolitionist” in most of the South in the years running up to the Civil War was the equivalent of high treason. Thus, Southerners developed poisoned attitudes toward a “meddling, Yankee” faith that they came to blame for inspiring slave revolts and attacks upon the planter economy of cotton, rice, indigo, tobacco, and other crops.

Also, Taylor points out the plain, hard facts of geography in determining the character of future settlements:

... Most population movement inland from the coast tended to be due west. When one realizes that New England is east of New York (and not north of it), one realizes that New Englanders had a lot farther to go before they reached the center of the continent. When Yankee settlement was filling in central and western New York, southern coastal settlers were more than half the way to the Mississippi River.

The few Congregationalists that did arrive continued, for the most part, the cooperation with the Presbyterians already begun ...⁶

Furthermore, there was at first significant theological interpenetration between the two bodies on matters relating to historic Reformed, or Calvinist, teaching on human salvation, the public duties of Christians, and abstinence from vices such as alcohol and amusements. This tended to diminish significantly any differences between the two communions. As Presbyterians possessed decided organizational advantages over Congregationalists in the field of evangelism and church planting in frontier communities, most people of Reformed sympathy, usually better-educated (and better-off) settlers, instinctively lent their efforts toward founding Presbyterian congregations, due to their more sturdy ecclesiastical infrastructure, as one might describe it these days. Pastors could more easily maintain contact with their colleagues in presbyteries and synods rather than distant correspondence with the still-fragile Congregational associations in New England. In other words, it was not as if Presbyterians were “stealing” Congregational “sheep” on purpose, despite the grumblings of later generations when governance practices and theology had become more sharply defined between the two groups. In any case, both became handicapped in the days of the Second Great Awakening by their obstinate insistence on a trained, educated clergy, something that the two eventually dominant Christian groups in the South, Methodists and Baptists, mostly did away with for reasons having to do with their focus upon the “common person” and their belief that elaborate doctrine sullied simple Christian teaching, where an emotional experience of salvation was the overriding concern. (But in a great irony, two different schismatic groups among Methodists would join with Congregationalists decades later.)

With cultural secession having preceded political secession by some years, the death knell of the original Southern Congregationalism was really a foregone conclusion, even before April 1861 when the new Army of the Confederacy seized control of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, a short distance from Independent Church. The Midway Whites and Whites in the other mixed-polity congregations fled almost entirely to pure Presbyterian ones, where reactionary interpretations of Scottish Calvinist theology were gaining favor against the supposed compromises of modernity represented by Northern “heretics” educated at the likes of Andover and Yale. To be sure, the more sanguine views of God’s benevolence advocated by figures like Nathaniel William Taylor and Charles Grandison Finney were, in retrospect, probably out of place in a time of belligerence where Protestant Christians were fighting yet other Protestant Christians. But the coming of the Civil War and its aftermath would *of its own accord* harden prejudices against ideas and people

believed to be culturally subversive, traits that are still discernible today in much of the present territory of the Southeast Conference. As raw, anger-saturated emotion supplanted calm, rational discourse, a sane, humane, sober theology suffered perhaps the greatest loss of any American cultural institution by the War.

Concretely, by the time of Appomattox Court House, only Independent Church in Charleston was left standing (institutionally; the Midway building survived the ravages of the War and is now a Liberty County, Georgia tourist attraction maintained by a nonprofit organization and not related whatsoever to the nearby predominantly-Black Congregational Church, started by the American Missionary Association and still a member of the UCC), and it was in practical ruins, as were all its neighbors regardless of denomination. During the entire period of Reconstruction, it struggled mightily to regain its former prominence as a church for governors, planters, municipal leaders, legislators, and other public figures that it once had. Regrettably, it had to settle for being something of a nondescript community church, having no firm identity to fasten on as the historic Southern denominations got back on their feet as mostly sectional bodies in the postbellum age, with each usually touting itself to a spiritually needy public as the divinely sanctioned path to salvation.

So the church that became known as Circular would have its work cut out for it in a devastated, pinched Charleston of the late 19th century. As recent-day chronicler Joanne Calhoun put it:

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Circular Church was in a very different position than in the past. Gone were the days of opulence and prosperity and the days of having the largest congregation in Charleston. Returning to the spirit of its early roots, it would struggle to stay alive and to find its new identity. It would change from a Dissenter church that had become one of the most powerful churches in the South to a small Dissenter church once again.⁷

Although a new edifice was constructed by 1892 to replace a structure that burned in an 1861 fire, something entirely unrelated to the conduct of the War Between the States (as Southerners were wont to term the Civil War), only 88 or 89 persons belonged to the church in 1912.⁸ Between those two dates, Congregational yearbooks reported a peak of 140 people on the rolls, for two consecutive years, in 1900 and 1901. Still, Circular retained some prestige from the past, and during the age of so-called “pulpit princes,” its preference for highly-educated pastors who were unusually distinguished in oratory for a Southern congregation kept it within the fold of some elite affection, Calhoun’s claim of low social status notwithstanding. Circular simply had a denominational name (by the late 19th century, the church began consistently

identifying itself as “Congregational” rather than “Independent”) that evoked disgust in the minds of devotees of Southern faiths (and culture), and mainly attracted, as Calhoun put it, people of a (somewhat) more tolerant, more socially-conscious bent than was even conceivable in the city’s old-line Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal edifices. In the depths of Southern cultural separatism of the early 20th century, Circular was at a low point numerically, falling at one point to only 49 members, in 1920. Figures hovered from 50 to 65 people from then until World War II; however, the church had no financial problems to speak of due to the affluence of the membership.

In just two short years, the rolls jumped from 57 in 1940 to 100 in 1942. This was probably due to an increase in Northerners either becoming students or faculty at the Military College of South Carolina, popularly known as “The Citadel,” as well as a surge of Naval officers and sailors stationed in Charleston. It was during this period that Circular Church moved in 1939 from the Eastern North Carolina Conference of the Southern Convention of Congregational Christian Churches to the (White) Georgia Conference, which became a founding body of the Southeast Convention of Congregational Christian Churches in 1949, thereby beginning an affiliation that has continued to the present, for over 80 years. Between its initial recognition by nationally-organized Congregationalism in 1882 and the 1931 formation of the CC Churches, Circular Church had been a member of Congregational conferences in, first, Florida, and then later, North Carolina (in this case, a segregated, Whites-only body). For the first two centuries or so of its existence, it was not connected with any ecclesiastical body at all or only casually related to one (usually a presbytery in the Low Country region of the state), validating the early popular name of the church: “Independent.”

The World War II period and the immediate aftermath marked the best times the church had experienced since the beginning of hostilities in 1861. Although perhaps of a lower profile than, say, Edmund Kirby and George Edwards had been in their time, pastors Archie Bedford and William Barnhart made strong impressions upon a historic congregation nearing the completion of its third century of existence. Things seemed for a time like the church had been finally redeemed from years of obscurity and “Yankee” stigma. But with the coming of the Civil Rights and later the peace movements, Circular would continue to undergo trials that would test its viability in the religious landscape of the South Carolina Low Country. The congregation’s refusal to shy away from “hot-button” matters of faith and society was somewhat repellent to staid, stuffy Charlestonians, making the congregation unattractive to them, and the institutional problems persisted, despite the growth of churches elsewhere in the region, like the rest of the country. This was coupled with the

beginning of the population decline of the city, something that particularly enters into the geographical facts of the city being located on a peninsula between two rivers, the Ashley and the Cooper, both feeding into the Atlantic Ocean. Less-well-to-do Whites in particular began moving northward to formerly undeveloped marsh-like lands, building subdivisions resembling those in say, Columbia or Atlanta and nothing like the gracious, Colonial homes of the city's heritage. Naturally enough, they wanted churches closer to them—and they certainly did not want an undesirable theological and cultural liberalism to follow them out of Charleston proper.

This brought about a crisis of institutional confidence that grew to the point that, after Barnhart (who had opposed integration of Circular Church during his decade-long tenure)⁹ retired in 1968, lay leaders gave serious thought to closing the congregation, over a decade before its 300th anniversary. Even as 202 people remained on the rolls, there was likely a considerable amount of inactivity among them, and some people were probably “burning out,” as modern argot would have it. It was a cry for help, basically. And it was one that was heard from a quite unusual source.

Developments in another denomination, ironically one associated locally with the Black community, would give Circular Church a new lease on life. The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA; known to some Southerners as the “Northern church”) maintained an all-Black presbytery in the Low Country and Pee Dee regions of the state and was looking to become racially diverse by establishing a White or, preferably, interracial congregation in the Charleston area. Instead of doing this, however, the Atlantic Presbytery chose rather to supply the pulpit of Circular and invite it to become a member church. The leadership happily responded to the overture, and the UPCUSA helped to pay the salaries of, first, the Rev. Robert Boston (served 1969-74) and, later (in the early years), the Rev. Albert Keller (served 1974-2010), the latter of whom was also known in the Charleston community as a medical ethicist. Circular remained dually affiliated with what became the Presbyterian Church (USA) until 1993, when it departed Presbyterianism to return to exclusive UCC affiliation due to the merger of the UPCUSA and the all-White Presbyterian Church in the U.S. in 1983 bringing about an integrated presbytery with more conservative churches, thus rendering the original purpose of the Presbyterian relationship moot.

Keller especially re-energized the congregation with a distinctively liberal theological ethos and a more aggressive social ministry than Circular had ever known before. This was coupled with issues such as the eventual departure of most Episcopal parishes in the city and region from their national denomination due to their (and the

Diocese of South Carolina's) vocal opposition to national support of LGBTQI ordination and rights and the reluctance of other mainline Protestant congregations to veer too far away from local mores. As such, Circular Church began reaping a harvest of a mixture of transplants to Charleston from throughout the U.S. due to gentrification of the local economy (with an especially strong tourist base) and locals unhappy with the persistence of outdated customs and doctrine in more conventional churches. Thus, under the aegis of the Rev. Jeremy Rutledge (unrelated to a locally-prominent Charleston family), who became pastor in 2012 and calls himself a "religious naturalist," Circular Church grew to the point that, by 2023, it had become the Southeast Conference's largest congregation, with 600 members. Only four other churches have held that honor during a single year in the entire history of the SEC going back to 1966.

Nearly three and a half centuries ago, no one would have imagined that an outpost of New England civilization in the Deep South could survive and thrive through vicissitudes of settlement, empire forged through enslavement, war, depression, social tensions, and the temptations of prosperity. But those who know the Scriptures and the faith well enough to hold that God is faithful regardless of human circumstance should not be surprised that Circular Congregational Church of Charleston, South Carolina is alive and well in the 21st century.

NOTES

1. Erskine Clarke, *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 37.

2. *Ibid.*, 66.

3. Richard H. Taylor, *Southern Congregational Churches* (Benton Harbor, MI: self-published, 1994), 12.

4. For more detailed histories of Circular Church, see these works: Joanne Calhoun, *The Circular Church: Three Centuries of Charleston History* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2008); George N. Edwards, *A History of the Independent or Congregational Church of Charleston South Carolina, Commonly Known as Circular Church* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1947); David Ramsay, *The History of the Independent or Congregational Church in Charleston, South Carolina, From Its Origin Till the Year 1814; With An Appendix Containing the Speech of the Rev. William Tennent, A. M. in the Commons House of Assembly, Charleston, S.C. January 11, 1777, on the Petition of the Dissenters From the*

Church Then Established in That State; Praying for a Constitutional Recognition of the Equal Rights of All Religious Denominations (Philadelphia: J. Maxwell, 1815).

5. For a more detailed history of Midway Church, see James Stacy, *History and Published Records of the Midway Congregational Church, Liberty County, Georgia* (1903: repr. Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1979).

6. Taylor, 22.

7. Calhoun, 91.

8. *Ibid.*, 101. Calhoun's research determined the membership figure to be 89, while the *Congregational Year-Book: Statistics for 1912* indicated that the church reported 88. There is of course, only a minuscule difference between the numbers; they clearly convey the struggle Circular Church faced in attracting new members in the postbellum era.

9. *Ibid.*, 119. According to Calhoun, it should be noted that Barnhart did not oppose the integration of Circular Church out of a segregationist stance, but mainly out of fear that the potential for violence instigated by racists such as the Ku Klux Klan would endanger the building. One wonders in the present time, though, whether such reasoning was any more morally sound than outright racism, as some critics would deem it an idolatry of property.